DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 280 814 SP 028 691

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TITLE Successful Life Experiences, Teaching Styles and Stress in Beginning Teachers.
PUB DATE 24 Apr 87
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (68th, Washington, DC, April 20-24, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Beginning Teachers; *Career Choice; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Preservice Teacher Education; *Stress Variables; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Behavior; *Teaching Styles
IDENTIFIERS University of Western Ontario (Canada)

ABSTRACT

The data in this study measure beginning teachers' perceptions of their own success in school and the degree to which they now believe themselves to be committed to making school a happy, successful place for their students. The research also provides Canadian data on the sources and nature of stress during the first year or two of teaching and how beginning teachers perceive their stress levels compared with other beginning teachers, more experienced teachers, their own students, and during their preservice training. Anonymous questionnaire data were elicted from 300 Faculty of Education elementary and secondary graduates of a one-year consecutive program from the 1984 and 1985 graduates of the University of Western Ontario. The questionnaire was returned by 170 men and women who were currently employed. (JD)

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Successful Life Experiences, Teaching Styles and Stress in Beginning Teachers*

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Beginning teachers, who are fortunate enough to find a teaching position, move from an idealized program of training focused on "survival skills" to a classroom, which requires about the same degree of responsibility from a beginning teacher as it does of an experienced teacher with 20 years of service. Entry into the profession is sudden. The missionary ideals characteristic of teacher training have become transformed into the "reality shock" of everyday classroom life. Lortie (1975) has suggested that reality shock is enhanced by the cellular organization of the school, where easy contacts between beginning and experienced teachers are hampered during the school day. Muller-Fohrbrodt, Cloetta & Dann (1978) state that reality shock deals with the assimilation of a very complex reality. This reality may take many forms, including subjectively experienced problems and pressures (stress); changes in behavior which are often contrary to one's own belief; attitudinal shifts (usually from progressive to more conservative stances); changes in personality (including self-concept); and, in extreme cases, withdrawal from teaching.

The profession of teaching today, like many other vocations, is entered by an increasingly capable group of college graduates. This year our own Faculty will accept into its consecutive program 670 students from a student pool of 5500 applicants and most students will be required to have an 80% average in a minimum of five undergraduate courses. Other Faculties in Ontario, Canada, where admission requirements may be lower, evidence a ratio of acceptances to applicants in the last five years which is dramatically more selective than in earlier years (Fullan & Connelly, 1987, p. 17).

One segment of the present paper looks at the life events which induced 170 of Western's recent education graduates into selecting teaching as a profession. What formative experiences and "significant others" do beginning

* Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association. Washington, D.C., April 24, 1987. The authors are indebted to the University of Western Ontario for partial funding of this research.

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teachers recall as important influences in their career development? Do our young, achieving teachers today ascribe to the position, so vividly described by Purkey (1984), Reitzes & Mutran (1980) and Leviton & Kiraly (1975), that the experience of success leads them to provide an expectational environment wherein their own students in turn will be successful? The data in this study address young teachers' perceptions of their own success in school and the degree to which they now believe themselves to be committed to making school a happy, successful place for their own students. The research also provides Canadian data on the sources and nature of stress during the first year or two of teaching; how beginning teachers perceive their stress levels compared with other beginning teachers, more experienced teachers, their own students and during their consecutive year of preservice training in a Faculty of Education.

Anonymous questionnaire data were elicited from 300 Faculty of Education elementary and secondary graduates of a one-year consecutive program from the 1984 and 1985 graduates at the University of Western Ontario. The structured questionnaire instrument was returned by 170 (54% return) men and women who were currently employed. Each recipient was asked to:

a) identify those life-events which predispose a teacher to assume a positive or negative attitude toward teaching;

b) identify those positive or negative teaching strategies which each currently uses in the classroom;

c) describe his/her level of perceived stress during their undergraduate years;

d) describe his/her level of perceived stress during one year of teacher-training at the Faculty of Education;

e) establish his/her general level of perceived stress;

f) identify the sources of stress, if any, associated with beginning teachers; and

g) describe the nature and effectiveness of selected coping patterns if and when distress occurs.

Respondents taught in essentially equal numbers in rural, small-town, urban and suburban schools. Grades K-6 were taught by 34% of the teachers; Grades 7, 8, 9 by 24% and Grades 10+ by 43%. Seventy-one per cent were female and each graduation year was represented by approximately half of the respondents. Large, medium and small schools were equally represented and the median class size was 28 students. Forty per cent of the respondents' parents were teachers. Thirty-five per cent were themselves married with no children and 10% had children.

Hiebert (1985) has recently concluded that about 25-35% of teachers regard their job as extremely stressful. Each of our respondents was asked to respond to the question: "Personally, how stressful do you find being a teacher?" Regarded as an acceptably reliable and valid procedure, we used this index to establish each subject's perceived level of debilitating stress [cf. Kyriakou, 1980; Jankovic, 1981; and Friesen & Williams, 1985]. Our first and second year graduates reported that 14% were extremely stressed; 57% were moderately stressed and 5% were not stressed at all. Thirty per cent felt they were more stressed than other beginning teachers they knew; 81% were more stressed than the experienced teachers they knew; 63% were more stressed than their own students and 56% were more stressed than when they were recently pre-service students in the Faculty of Education. Whatever their level of perceived stress, 56% felt their stress was work-place-related; 10% was home-related and 15% was indigenous to their very nature. Compared to their age peers, 49% felt their physical health was better than most (only 1% worse) and 49% also perceived their mental health to be better (only 4% worse)! Males in both instances tended to perceive their health to be somewhat better than did the females, but the numbers were small and not conclusive.

Veenman's (1984) survey of the literature on beginning teachers notes that by far the majority of data available world-wide have been obtained from questionnaire studies. Their results generally agree on the major nature/sources of difficulty reported. These, in order of frequency, are classroom discipline, motivating students, dealing with individual differences, assessing students' work and relations with parents. The senior author's previous studies [cf. McMurray, 1986; 1982(a) and 1982(b)] are also in agreement. The present study suggests that a number of sources of stress are of extreme concern to the beginning teachers. They are, in order of rank:
(i) students' behavior; (ii) efforts to upgrade students' skills and achievement; (iii) lack of time available for needy individual students; (iv) student evaluation and upgrading students' values and (v) class management and paperwork. It is clear that tabulated frequencies of a

group's responses are similar from study to study and country to country. It is also clear, however, that what precipitates stress in one individual may not do so for another. Some respondents were considerably stressed by such disparate factors as "working in two schools," "noise in an open-concept class," "large classes," "extracurricular demands" and the like. To quote Hiebert (1985) again: "What functions as a stressor for one person may not be....for a different person, or even for the same person at another time" (p. 13).

Despite their short time in the classroom, the male and female respondents in this investigation appear to experience on average the same levels of stress as more experienced women teachers, reported by McMurray (1986).

The relatively small amount of debilitating stress perceived in our respondents is also reflected in their positive levels of self-esteem. None of them regards himself or herself as a "poor teacher." All but 5% would choose teaching in retrospect. Twenty-three per cent of the males and 29% of the females regard themselves as excellent teachers already! Indeed, 83% regard themselves successful; 82% feel their colleagues believe them to be successful; 89% feel their friends believe them to be successful; and 95% feel their family believes them to be successful. Fourteen per cent place themselves in the top quintile professionally and eight per cent do so personally.

It is also of interest to consider aspects of their lives, other than teaching, in which they consider themselves successful. In descending order of importance, the group as a whole tended to attach great importance to (i) marriage and the family; (ii) friends and interpersonal relations; (iii) sports and athletics; (iv) hobbies and the arts; and (v) professional advancement. Younger women seem to assign greater importance to marriage, interpersonal relations, hobbies and professional advancement than the young men in our sample. These sex differences should be interpreted cautiously, however, because of the comparatively small number of men (N = 49 vs. N = 121) in the sample.

The respondents as a group assumed a rather shallow and simplistic stance toward the formative, critical events which precipitated them to choose teaching as a career. The earliest events they could recall all centered around school; i.e. the influence of teachers; their parent was a teacher; they played school and they liked school. In the early grades again they remembered one or more warm, caring, friendly teacher; they experienced good achievement and liked school. Negatively, they hated school or a specific teacher and wanted to do better for other youngsters. Their

recall of formative events at the secondary level included good teachers and coaches. As well, they recalled their own desire to help both the teachers and the students and to tutor students who were experiencing difficulty. After secondary school, they served as volunteers in schools, acted as teaching assistants in University and while in the Faculty of Education, they enjoyed practice teaching.

Some dropped out of other jobs to come into teaching where they felt there were good jobs to be had. All in all, school is the predominant motivating force in their lives. Not a bad thing but less rich and mature in substance/depth/insight than those responses elicited from older, more mature teachers (McMurray, Posluns & Hardy, 1986).

When asked to "Rank the significant people who have made you the kind of teacher you are today," teachers, although less important than mothers, ranked above fathers and ranked much above friends. It was difficult to assess the value/importance of marriage and the influence of a spouse since less than half were married at the time.

The teacher-respondents overwhelmingly supported the view that positive and successful experience is important as an achievement motivator for students. Success is a condition vital for the enhancement of self-esteem. The techniques they cited for creating positive, success-producing experiences for their students were predominantly encouragement, praise and rewards. They tried to show that they cared and could accept what a student did. Then they would try to take him or her a step further. Some suggested the value of audiences and group work, clear feed-back in evaluation and the use of awards that might instill responsibility for the child's own learning. Conversely, as a group, they disagreed with the position that "Teachers should prepare young people for the real world" by intentionally providing them with more negative, punitive experiences. Only 15% agreed and 1% strongly agreed with this position. Although 22% said they had tried negative methods at one time or another, they found them wanting. Those familiar with the literature on the use of negative experiences/consequences as motivators (26%) simply rejected the methods as legitimate.

The examples of negative or punitive methods employed was ignored completely by 73/170 of the respondents, especially females. Those who did respond mentioned natural consequences which, it was assumed, would help the child to accept responsibility for his actions. A few used withdrawal of privileges, scolding and detentions as punitive measures.

All in all, most of the graduates of 1984 and 1985, if our respondents responses are representative of all, are not overwhelmed by debilitating anxiety; are committed to making school a happy, successful place for their students; have a good self-concept and would choose teaching as a profession if they could do it all over again! One respondent saw himself as "more of a friend and supporter of children than as a giver of knowledge." Another said, "I'm not yet treated as a professional. It's more work than I thought it would be."

Sometimes we all feel the same!

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